

Turning Aside to God
Exodus 3:1-15
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School started on Wednesday for our daughter Sydney, which means the return of the daily routine. Wake up, go in and wake Sydney up, brush my teeth, go back in and wake Sydney up again, go downstairs and fix Sydney's breakfast, go back upstairs to threaten Sydney with walking to school if she stays in bed and misses the bus. There's a comfortable familiarity in the routine, isn't there?

At the beginning of our story today Moses had settled into a nice routine. This day he probably got up early, put on some coffee and fetched his copy of the Midian Daily Gazette. He got his kids up for school and threatened to make them walk if they missed their camel. Then he kissed his wife goodbye and headed out to the sheep for a day of tending the flock. Nothing new here, just another day. At breakfast time, Moses was responsible for keeping the sheep safe. By dinner, he'd be responsible for freeing a whole nation of people from slavery.

On this workday like any other, on his umteenth trip up Mt. Horeb, probably chasing a pesky runaway sheep, Moses catches a glimpse of a strange sight, goes to investigate, and has his life changed forever by God. It's interesting that God would choose to come to Moses, because from all we know, Moses wasn't a particularly religious man at this point. In fact, there's no sign up to this point that Moses worships God; after all, he grew up bowing to golden Egyptian idols.

Moses' lack of familiarity with God may explain some of Moses' reluctance to jump at this opportunity. A call from God isn't necessarily like winning the divine lottery, as Moses points out when he responds, "Who am I, that I should go to the Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" Or, as it's translated in the Living Bible, "But I'm not the person for a job like that!" Moses is saying, "Me? God, you couldn't be suggesting that I go, could you? I mean, I'm a worker not a leader. I'm one of the behind-the-scenes people, not the frontline person."

Have you ever responded to God like that? I know I have in the past. As soon as I heard a call to serve God, the Excuse Machine would start churning: "You don't want me! I'm not a trained spiritual professional. Still can't find the book of Hosea in the Bible without looking in the table of contents. Slept in one morning last month and didn't make it to the worship service. I've spent a Sunday or two on the green instead of in the pew. You see? You don't want me, God. I'm a little under-qualified."

Here's a news flash: We're ALL under-qualified to do God's work. In fact, I would argue that we're all a little under-qualified to live our lives because we all face things that are simply overwhelming for us. Moses made excuses because he felt inadequate to do this alone. Well, he WAS inadequate, but he wouldn't be alone. God tells him, "Don't worry, Moses, I'm not sending you out alone. I will be with you. I would never ask you to do something by yourself. You couldn't do it without me, anyway. But with me, you can do anything."

God's giving him the hard sell, but Moses isn't ready to give in that easy. "Well...well...What if they won't listen to me? What if I tell them I've come to save them and just glare and cross their arms and ask, 'Who sent you?' What do I tell them?"

In other words Moses is saying, “Not only do I not think I can do this, but nobody else does, either.”

And God does something never done before: God gives a name: “I am who I am.” Later, in the Gospel of John, when Jesus uses all his “I am” sayings – “I am the bread of life, I am the way, the truth and the life” – he is drawing directly on this statement to show his divinity: “I am who I am.”

For Moses and for us, that name means both comfort and mystery. It is comforting because it reminds us of the rock-solid stability of God. In a world where absolutely nothing is stable – jobs, governments, economies, our own bodies – God stays God. The God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses is our God today, and we can put our trust in God just as much as those people did thousands of years ago. God is the great “I AM.”

But there’s mystery in that name as well. “I am who I am” – what does that mean, anyway? OK, you are who you are, but who are you? When we’re faced with our own crossroads or tough decisions or crises of faith, what does that mean to us? Who ARE you, God?

I believe we each have to answer that for ourselves. Another translation of God’s name to Moses is, “I will be who I will be.” In other words, “I am God, and what that means for you will depend upon how you live your life.” Who is God in our lives? For Moses, God may have been “I am with you.” For others, God may be “I am patient” or “I am forgiving” or “I am loving.” For me, God is “I am your Lord.” Who is God for you? That’s both the power and the mystery of God in our lives. “I am who I am.”

So after a little more hemming and hawing from Moses, he finally agrees to God’s plan, and the rest is not only history, but epic movie material for Cecil B. DeMille. Moses’ journey to Egypt is the most important event in the history of our faith, at least until that night in the manger with shepherds and the angels and that bright star.

But did you know it almost never happened? We almost never had any of this story. No Great Plagues, no Ten Commandments, no Charlton Heston in the cool beard. But one thing, one split-second action, made the difference in this story and in the whole history of God’s relationship to his people. One teeny tiny little thing saved all those slaves, and ultimately saved us as well.

Moses is doing his job, living his life, tending his sheep, when he sees the Burning Bush. And the Bible says, “So Moses thought, ‘I will go over and see this strange sight – why the bush does not burn up.’” When the Lord saw that Moses had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush.

He turned aside. That’s the thing. That’s what gets the whole ball rolling. Instead of keeping his head down, or ignoring this strange sight, or just plodding through his day, or going and telling someone else, he goes over and looks. And then God calls to him.

Moses could have said, “Wow, that bush is burning and it’s not being consumed! I should probably check that out! But, you know, I’ve got a job to do, and the wife is making meatloaf for dinner, and I’ve already taken a break from work this morning. I should probably just ignore it.” It was certainly his choice. His attention was his to give or not to give. And by giving it, his life was forever changed and enriched by God.

Often times the circumstances of our life and the evil that operates in the world around us keeps us from focusing on God’s presence in our lives. God is right there, in the midst of the storm, in the center of the chaos, but we are so distracted that we don’t

even look. In your life, what keeps you from looking? What distracts you from seeing God's presence around you?

We complete our routine day after day, we tend our sheep and pay our bills and do our best to be good family people and good citizens and even good churchgoers. We fight the good fight and try to keep a smile on even when it feels like there's not much to smile about. But maybe, just maybe, God's calling us to something greater, something peaceful, something more. Maybe there's a burning bush in our lives, waiting for us to turn aside from our hectic pace and frantic lives, to take our noses off the grindstone and our hands off the panic button and look. And when we look, maybe, just maybe, God's waiting to speak to us and call us to something far greater than we can ever imagine.

Moses turned aside to see a bush that was burning but not consumed. Today, God may work differently, but no less powerfully. My burning bush was a conversation in a parking lot with the minister's wife, who said half-jokingly that I should go to seminary. Your burning bush may be a crisis in your life, or an empty nest, a job change, or a simple invitation from someone you know, maybe someone in this church, to serve or to teach or to lead. God speaks to you through those kinds of situations. And it's your choice, your attention to give. Do you turn aside and look and give your attention to God, or do you ignore it because you think you are inadequate or under-qualified or not ready?

You woke up today, maybe had some coffee, maybe read the paper. When you woke up, maybe you were responsible for doing your job or providing for your family or taking care of your children or just making it through the day with your sanity and your hope intact. Sometimes that's all we can do. But there's a call out there. Maybe you haven't heard it yet. Maybe you've already heard it, but don't know how to respond. What would happen if you turned aside and said to God, "Here I am," if you invited God to do something extraordinary in your life? Who would you be when you woke up tomorrow?